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SUBJECT: NEW PARTNERSHIPS IN REMOTE ISLANDS PAVE THE WAY FOR
PROSPERITY, PEACE

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: The DCM traveled October 21 to Tawi-Tawi -- an island province at the tip of Mindanao's terrorist-afflicted Sulu Archipelago -- and inaugurated four projects exemplifying the strength and diversity of Philippine-U.S. partnerships. The Embassy sent an interagency team including USAID Director, Defense Attache, Joint Special Operations Task Force Philippines officials, and a Mindanao-focused Public Affairs officer to attend the ribbon-cutting events, where the DCM underscored that the USG remains steadfast in supporting collaborative projects in Mindanao. The Philippine Deputy Advisor to the President on the Peace Process Nabil Tan and Philippine Armed Forces Deputy Commander for Western Mindanao Command Brigadier General Ramirez joined the Embassy group, which Tawi-Tawi Governor Sadikul Sahali and Bongao Mayor Albert Que greeted at the airport. The DCM's interviews and appearance with officials received broad regional and national coverage on radio, print, and television. END SUMMARY.

BRINGING DISTANT TAWI-TAWI CLOSER

[1](#)2. Tawi-Tawi is a collection of islands lying within motorboat distance to Sabah, Malaysia. It is a sparsely populated, poor province that is a traditional transit point for terrorists and smugglers operating in the Malaysia-Indonesia-Philippines region. The inter-island and cross-national barter trade has been historically very active and includes smuggling of black market goods. Though underdeveloped, Tawi-Tawi has significant potential for growth in legitimate export businesses due to healthy fishing and seaweed industries and because it has suffered less conflict in the recent past than its neighbors in Basilan and Jolo. The four projects visited create economic opportunities for all residents of Tawi-Tawi, open this smuggling point to the outside world, and demonstrate the USG's long-term commitment to peace and prosperity in the Philippines.

INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS PROVIDE PATHS TO PROSPERITY

[1](#)3. During the ribbon-cutting ceremony at Sanga Sanga Airport, the DCM remarked that the aim of the joint project between USAID and the provincial government was to widen the runway in order to land planes as big as a Boeing 737, which would facilitate tourism and the growth of exports. Governor Sahali lauded the continued friendship and commitment of the USG and the American people. The group reviewed the engineering plans, spoke to the media, and finally donned hardhats and mounted a bulldozer at the end of the runway for cameras.

[1](#)4. At a separate event, the party inaugurated the Sanga Sanga Road Upgrade, which is part of a major USAID-Philippine government collaboration called the Tawi-Tawi Bridge-Road Partnership Project. Once the project is finished, a series of roads and bridges will link the most populous settlements of Tawi-Tawi to the Sanga Sanga Airport in Bongao. Excited townspeople and media received the DCM, Governor and Mayor, who spoke to the crowd, celebrating the joint initiative's success in leveraging commitments that will dramatically improve the quality of life in Tawi-Tawi. The DCM underscored that the arterial road, like the airport upgrade, will

provide the groundwork for better access to markets and tourism, which support not only prosperity, but peace as well.

BUILDING SCHOOLS AND TRUST

15. The DCM and party traveled with Undersecretary Tan, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Brigadier General Ramirez, and Governor Sahali by boat, operated by U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force, to the remote town of Lapid Lapid where local officials and former Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) Commander Jum Dial greeted them. The DCM cut a ribbon on a school building that had been entirely refurbished by U.S. and Philippine Seabees (naval construction battalions) and other military personnel. BGen Ramirez noted that in Tawi-Tawi, as elsewhere in Mindanao, U.S. and Philippine personnel were cooperating smoothly and winning the trust of residents where terrorists and insurgent groups previously had significant influence. The DCM thanked and commended the Philippine and U.S. military personnel for working together and making remarkable progress, for which the assembled townspeople expressed deep appreciation.

16. The DCM inaugurated another new school building at the Panglima Arasia Elementary School, which was completed thanks to an innovative USAID-Petron Foundation partnership that includes participation from Habitat for Humanity and other civil society groups. A jubilant crowd braved sweltering sun to welcome the Embassy team, and the DCM remarked that the American people were pleased to offer their ongoing support for partnerships such as this that combine public, private, and civil society resources. The project aims to build 60 such new classrooms and refurbish 480 others. As he did at each event, the DCM emphasized that the project was a joint effort designed to advance peace and prosperity

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in the Philippines.

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KENNEY